



"I hear the marigolds but not the daisies anymore. It's too late in the year for them."

What sort of man hears the flowers talking to him? What are the flowers telling him? Is this man crazy, or are the flowers telling him something important — some truth *meant for his ears alone*?

the sound of hollyhocks

Hugh Garner

Two young student nurses were shooting pool with a couple of the patients in the recreation room, but the TV set on the glassed-in veranda was turned off. It was almost time for late evening sedation, and most of the patients were sitting on the edges of their beds, wearing pajamas and dressing gowns. They were waiting for the registered nurse on the evening shift, accompanied by a male attendant, to bring along her tray of sleeping potions and pills.

Pinehills Clinic is now about evenly divided between alcoholics and what we called "head cases," which covers a bewildering variety of psychoneurotics and relatively harmless psychotics. The drunks tend to band together for companionship but most of the head cases, except those recovering following treatment, live in their own loner's world.

I gave a wave to the professor and the Protestant minister as I passed the open door to their room and they waved back before continuing their conversation. The door to the next room was shut, as were the doors to the rooms across the hall, but the next one on the left was open. I paused in the hallway and looked in. One of the beds was empty, but sitting on the edge of the other was a tall good-looking young man who was a close neighbor of mine in the dining hall. He was staring at the floor, his chin in his hands and his head undulating with the forlorn despair of a caged polar bear.

Somebody, before my arrival, had nicknamed him "Rock Hudson," which fitted his tall good looks and his movie star air of disdainful

quietude. He did not look up but continued mumbling to himself. I made my way back to the dormitory where I had been sleeping for three nights since my arrival at the clinic. While we waited for the nurse I listened to the grandiose plans of the young man in the next bed, who bubbled with the excitement of one who has almost reached the top of his manic cycle.

After breakfast the next morning one of the attendants stopped me in the hall and said, "Mr. Armstrong, we're moving you into one of the rooms." He took my bag and clothes from a dormitory locker, and I followed him along one of the bisecting corridors that formed an L through the ward, lined with single and two-bed rooms. He entered one of the semi-privates and hung my clothes in a closet. I wasn't too happy to discover I was to share Rock Hudson's sleeping quarters. My roommate was out, having been taken downstairs with the others for his tri-weekly electric shock treatments.

During the first two days we shared the room not a word passed between Rock Hudson and me, he seemingly content to sit on his bed, staring out of the window or down at the floor, while I sought companionship among my fellow drunks. He occasionally muttered a few words to himself, but most of his time seemed to be listening to sounds pitched too high for others to hear, like an unheard noise that wakens a sleeping dog.

On the third afternoon I lay down in my bed to grab a short nap. Most of the ward's patients had gone for a walk through the grounds with a pair of attendants, while others were down in Occupational Therapy making their moccasins, wallets and ceramics. Rock was sitting on the edge of his bed as usual, staring at his shoes. Though I knew he was aware of my arrival he didn't look up. I was just dozing off when he spoke to me for the first time.

"I hear the marigolds but not the daisies any more. It's too late in the year for them."

I turned my head sharply and stared at him. He was looking at me and smiling.

"I suppose daisies *are* a springtime flower," I agreed, not wanting to ignore him but feeling foolish for allowing myself to be drawn into such a kooky conversation.

"They're not necessarily a springtime flower," he corrected me.

"Well—no, I guess not."

"They tell me everything. Especially the hollyhocks. They're a funny kind of flower in a way, tall and gangling, but they've got good ears."

I sat up, as casually as I could.

"They were Sandra's favorite flower. I could never understand why. Most people like roses or 'mums or even petunias, but not hollyhocks."

I agreed.

He turned away and stared through the window at the red tile roof of a building across the courtyard, nodding now and then as if somebody or something was talking to him.

He spoke to me quite often from then on, though he didn't make much sense at first. By the end of my second week however his shock treatments or something had seemed to snap him out of his earlier mental isolation, and he talked quite sanely for short periods of time. From what he told me I was able to piece together a two-dimensional sketch of what his life had been up to then.

Rock was the only child of one of my city's leading bankers. He had attended the right prep school, and later had taken a business admin. course in university. On graduation he had gone into one of the downtown branches of his father's bank as an assistant accountant, and from then on his promotions had been foreordained.

One evening as we sat smoking in our room, and I listened to Rock do most of the talking, he suddenly exclaimed, "She's the Bitch of Belsen!" We hadn't been talking about women at the time, but I presumed he was talking about his wife.

Sandra had been a teller in the bank, and their romance had been the old familiar one of a young man and woman brought together through office propinquity. He had taken her to lunch a few times before they had an evening date, but after that he began visiting her apartment, which she shared with another girl. When her roommate married and moved away he half moved into the apartment with her, paying a share of the rent. Though Sandra was a high school dropout he was sure she was intelligent and pretty enough to hurdle any social barriers his family or friends might raise against her. They were married secretly one afternoon at City Hall, and shortly after the wedding he took her home to meet his parents.

The meeting between his bride and mother had been a disaster, though he avoided confessing this to me openly. His father had proved

friendly enough to Sandra, but the old gentleman's family and social decisions were generally ignored by his wife. The first meeting between his wife and his mother proved also to be the last, and Sandra was never again invited to the house. One time he told me, "Mother's a take-over woman, great in a crisis but sometimes unbearable when things are normal."

He was not happy as a banker, and he began to question what would be waiting for him when he reached the top. The thought of the emptiness of the achievement frightened him, and once he told me, "I could see my father sitting at his big empty desk down at me, head office, staring through the window at something far off that he had lost or overlooked when he was young. At home I saw him going through the ritual of two pre-dinner cocktails, later either watching TV or getting dressed to take Mother to the symphony or a theatre first night or some other social do. It's all a charade, Armstrong, don't you see? They're only puppets being maneuvered by strings from their Presbyterian heaven."

Rock and his bride had continued living in her bachelor-girl digs, but they rented and furnished a small apartment when he received his promotion to accountant in one of the bank's suburban branches. Their daytime separation and his refusal to let his father help them out financially soon drove them slowly but inexorably apart. There had been long acrimonious squabbles about money, about his parents' attitudes towards her, about what she called his rich-boy mentality.

One evening she had phoned home to let him know she was staying at a girl friend's place overnight, and another time had disappeared for a whole weekend. When he had called her at the bank on Monday morning she told him blithely that she had accompanied another girl and her husband to their summer cottage. He had checked and found her story to be true, as far as she had told it to him.

After that, however, he knew their marriage was on the skids. The next time she stayed away overnight he did not bother to call her, but through his father arranged a loan, packed a two-suiter, and flew to Las Vegas. There he threw away his money on the tables, and also on a couple of would-be Hollywood actresses, whom he described as "Wampus Baby Stars of 1944." He returned home to find his wife had moved, and his clothes and belongings placed in storage. Two weeks later he received the news that Sandra had been killed in a highway

traffic accident, along with a young married man who was driving the car.

He said to me, "I had to play the broken-hearted husband at the funeral, but that part of it was easy. Believe it or not, Armstrong, but I *was* broken-hearted. Mother, of course, took me back home where she could treat me as her little boy. She never mentioned Sandra's name again. I moped around the house and garden all summer, and it was then that the flowers began telling me the things I wanted to hear."

Rock's continued improvement seemed miraculous to me. I awoke one afternoon from my nap to find his psychiatrist sitting in our room talking to him. I kept my face turned to the wall, pretending to still be asleep.

Rock was asking, "... and in your opinion, Dr. Kellock, how long does this usually take?"

"It's hard to say," the doctor answered, in the vague way of doctors and lawyers. "I think the shock treatments are doing you a world of good, and you tell me your blackouts aren't as frequent or of as long duration as they were; certainly I've noticed that they are not constant as they were when you were first admitted. If things continue improving as they have over the past two weeks you could be ready for discharge perhaps in another month or so."

"I'm anxious now to get back to work, Doctor."

"Now, Mr. Ranson, I didn't say anything about going back to work just yet. You'll need a couple of months, at least, of convalescence after leaving here. Just take things easy, get plenty of rest and try to get rid of your memories of your wife. Let the medication do the rest."

"I'm only twenty-five, Doctor," Rock said. "I realize now that I was ill for months before coming here, and you tell me I've been here at the clinic for seven weeks. That's an awful long time for a young man."

"I know it is. I'm quite pleased with the improvement you are now showing, and if your recovery continues as it has over the past couple of weeks I see no reason why you shouldn't be discharged in a month or so. These blackouts, as you call them, will probably continue for a time, but will continue to diminish in both length and frequency. When they disappear completely we'll be able to talk of going home."

"I hope so, Doctor."

The doctor stood up and said, "Just take things easy. Recovery from

any illness seems slow and tedious, but there are times when it can't be hurried."

"How many more shock treatments do I need, Doctor?"

"Perhaps only another week. It all depends."

"I don't hear the flowers talking much any more," Rock said with a laugh.

"Good. It's not uncommon for a person with your illness to have auditory hallucinations. You may have short infrequent returns of these but they'll disappear as your condition continues to improve. Don't let them worry you."

I heard the doctor walking to the door.

"Thanks, Doctor," Rock said.

"Just remember to take things easy, Mr. Ranson."

After the doctor had gone I turned over and said, "Things are looking up for you."

"Yes. Were you listening?"

"For a while."

"I've only got three more shock treatments, the doctor said.

Did you hear him telling me the way I used to act when the treatments first started?"

I shook my head.

"It used to take four attendants to get me into the room, and they had to hold me down until they knocked me out with the needle. Now I don't mind taking the treatments at all, for I know they're doing me good. What I hate most is missing breakfast three mornings a week."

"How do you feel afterwards?"

"Woozy for a while, and I can't remember recent things very well.

When I wake up an attendant brings me back here, and I usually sleep until lunch. When I wake up my memory has mostly returned."

"The shock treatments have sure done you a lot of good."

"They seem to. You know, Mr. Armstrong—"

It was the first time he'd called me "Mister." I said, "Please call me Wilf."

"Okay, Wilf. You know, I once tried to commit suicide."

"Oh."

"It wasn't long after Sandra was—after Sandra died. One night I went down to the kitchen and tried to slash my wrists with a carving knife. I cut one of them and then fainted I guess. The next thing I remember

was waking up in the hospital with my forearm bandaged. Maybe I didn't faint but blacked out. I know that when I was sent home again I began blacking out regularly, which threw a hell of a scare into them."

"Them?"

"My parents."

"How long did this go on?"

"I don't really know, Wilf. I don't remember much of the summer."

"Rock—" I smiled. "You know I've shared this room with you for more than two weeks and I still don't know what to call you. I've known all along that your last name is Ranson, but I don't know your first name."

"It's William. William Cornish Ranson. The Cornish is my maternal grandfather's name. Everybody calls me Bill."

"Around here they call you Rock."

He laughed. "I know. I'm beginning to answer to it."

"Somebody named you that before I got here. After Rock Hudson the movie star."

"That's pretty flattering, but undeserved," he said. He swung his feet to the floor and pulled up his pullover sleeve. "Here's my scar," he said, as I leaned on my elbow to look. Across his left wrist was a faint white scar bordered with the close elliptical marks of the stitches.

"You were lucky."

"Yes. I guess I realize that now. At the time I tried to kill myself I was still suffering from the shock of Sandra's death and the breakup of our marriage. It takes quite a while to get over something like that."

"Maybe you were lucky there too."

He shot me a quick look. "How do you mean, Wilf?"

"Well, one day last week we were sitting here talking, and you called her The Bitch of Belsen."

"Not Sandra," he said. "I wouldn't call Sandra anything like that."

I stared at him, wondering if he'd forgotten.

"When do you expect to leave here, Wilf?" he asked, as if to hurry away from the subject of his wife.

"I'm leaving here next Monday."

"You're lucky. All you alcoholics are lucky. Maybe I'd have been better off going on a binge myself than trying to bottle everything up inside me."

"I'm sure there's legitimate arguments both for and against it."

"There's arguments, legitimate or not, against everything," he said, laughing and jumping up from his bed.

For the rest of the week Rock—I couldn't get used to calling him Bill—acted quite normally, going out with the gang for walks through the grounds, talking to the attendants and other patients, glancing through some picture magazines we had in our room, and even going downstairs to Occupational Therapy once or twice, where he was making himself a wallet. One evening he came with us to a bingo game in the auditorium, where he sat opposite a young student nurse I'd seen him talking to in our recreation room.

She was a stunningly pretty girl, who, like the other students, was attached to a general hospital in another city, and was taking her psychiatric nursing training at the clinic. After the bingo they walked back to the ward together, and as I followed them along the corridor I thought to myself how perfectly matched they seemed to be. I guessed however, that her friendship with him was merely professional sympathy and friendliness, though perhaps part of his therapy.

I became afraid of what it might do to Rock when the current group of young nurses was replaced in a couple of weeks, and the pretty student left. Her attraction for him might be building up to an awful let-down, which might set him back to the way he had been at first.

That evening he had another "blackout" as he called them, and I heard him talking once again to the flowers, as we lay on our beds waiting for the ten o'clock medication. He said, "Yes, I know," which was followed by some mumbling I didn't understand. Then he sat up and shouted, "I don't believe it! From now on I'll only listen to the hollyhocks!"

I too sat up. "Take it easy, Bill," I said.

He gave me a dreamy smile.

"You had a nightmare that's all."

"What do dandelions know about anything?" he asked, staring into the darkness outside the window. He remained seated on the edge of his bed, staring outside and muttering to himself.

When the evening shift registered nurse brought our pills and sleeping potion, she and the attendant stared at Rock for a moment. I knew she would have to place his regression in her report, and it would delay Rock's discharge.

She handed me a small paper cup containing my pill. "Your sleeping potion has been discontinued, Mr. Armstrong," she said. "I suppose you'll be leaving us soon?"

"On Monday."

"That's fine. That's why they've reduced your medication."

I pointed to Rock, who was oblivious to us. "He was all right until a few minutes ago," I told her.

The nurse shook her head sadly. The attendant said, "He's improved a lot lately. I wouldn't want to see a young man like that moved down to A3 among the chronic cases."

The nurse handed Rock his small paper cup and said, "Here, Mr. Ranson. Here's something to make you sleep."

He gave her his blank smile and swallowed the bitter-tasting draught and the paper cup of grapefruit juice handed him by the attendant.

"Get into bed, Mr. Ranson, please," the nurse said, and he did as he was told.

The nurse and the attendant bid us good night, shut off the light and left, closing the door behind them. I fell asleep before Rock did, even without my sleeping potion.

When I awoke the next morning Rock was shaving himself with an electric shaver that one of the attendants had taken from his locker for him.

"Good morning, Wilf," he said. "You'd better get up. We'll be going down to breakfast pretty soon."

He had changed completely from the young man of the evening before.

There were three discharges from our ward on Saturday, and a couple of the alcoholics were allowed to go home for the weekend. The dining room was only partly full, and after breakfast Rock brought his coffee to my table, where we sat and talked until he was called out to join the rest of the "chain gang," as those who were taken to meals in a group were called.

"There's been a lot of improvement in that boy," said an elderly businessman who shared my table.

"Yes, he seems to be coming along fine," I answered.

"The first couple of weeks I was here he didn't speak to anyone."

"I know. I was his roommate for three days before he noticed me," said the busi-

nessman. "I feel sorry for the kids in here with mental troubles," said the busi-
nessman. "I may be a damn fool sometimes, but I'd sooner be a drunk
than one of them. I was afraid that boy was a hopeless case when I first
saw him, but his improvement has been almost miraculous."

When I returned upstairs Rock was lying on his bed reading a maga-
zine. He lowered it when I entered the room.

"What are you going to do this afternoon?" I asked him.

"Well, if Helen doesn't go away for the weekend I have a date to teach
her how to play pocket billiards," he answered. "A pool table isn't quite
satisfactory, but I can at least teach her the rudiments of the game."

"Is Helen the young nurse you walked over from the bingo game with
last night?"

"Yes, Helen MacDonald. She's from Niagara Falls. She's engaged to
a young doctor down there."

I was glad he knew that about her. Perhaps his interest was only a
friendly one too.

"Don't let me interfere with your reading," I said. "I'm going down to
A4 Ward to watch TV; ours will have nothing on but football all
afternoon."

"I'm looking forward to getting my house privileges," Rock said.
"I'll go visiting too. See you later, Wilf."

When I returned to A2 before supper Rock was shooting pool with
an attendant.

"Who's winning?"

"He's skunking me, Wilf. That's what I get for having been brought
up in a neighborhood that had no pool parlors."

"What happened to the young nurse you were going to teach to shoot
pocket billiards?"

"Helen? Her fiance came for her, and she went to the Falls for the
weekend." He seemed quite unperturbed by this, and laughed happily
as the attendant made a run of a string of balls.

On Sunday there were quite a few visitors to the clinic, and some
took lunch with the patients they had come to see, in the guest dining
room downstairs. After eating my lunch in the half-empty dining hall I
returned to my room and took my usual nap. I was awakened by the
sound of male and female voices in the room and when I sat up I saw

the voices were those of Rock and a man and woman in late middle age.

Rock said, "Wilf, I'd like you to meet my parents, Mr. Armstrong."

I stood up as Mr. Ranson offered me his hand with a smile and a
friendly nod. Rock's mother half turned and gave me a curt nod.

"I'll get out of here and give you a little privacy," I said, pulling on
my shoes.

"Don't let us drive you out," said Mr. Ranson. His wife turned away,
ignoring me.

As I tidied my hair before the mirror above the washbasin I heard her
say to Rock, "I'll phone our own doctor tomorrow. If you ask me

you're completely recovered now from your breakdown, and I'm sure
you'll be much better off at home, where I can take care of you."

"But Mother, Dr. Kellock told me just the other day—"

"He's already given you a wrong diagnosis. Why, you certainly weren't
suffering from anything as serious as he..."

I shut off the rest of her harmful foolishness by closing the door
behind me as I left.

Rock didn't speak to me at supper, and when I asked him later if he'd
enjoyed his parents' visit he turned his face to the wall and didn't
answer me. I spent the rest of the evening watching television on the
glassed-in veranda, and didn't return to our room until it was time to
put on our pajamas and bathrobes.

Rock was sitting fully dressed on the edge of his bed, staring
through the window and talking to himself. I changed quietly so as not
to disturb him.

"I know," he said, speaking to the unknown something outside.

"They told me. The hollyhocks are the only ones who really know. Ask
Sandra." He shook his head. "The Birch of Belsen wants me back, but
I won't go—never—never again!"

I lay down to wait for the medication to arrive, leaving Rock to him-
self. Every once in a while he muttered snatches of unrelated conversa-
tion.

When the nurse and the attendant arrived, Rock jumped up from his
bed and made a lunge at the man, knocking him back into the corridor
and spilling his jug of grapefruit juice on the floor. The nurse and I ran
out of the room, as the attendant wrestled with the younger man. The
nurse hurried back to her office, and in a minute or two a pair of younger
attendants came running along the hall. They quickly overpowered

Rock, and then carried the swearing, sobbing young man back to his bed. The nurse returned from the nursing station carrying a hypodermic syringe. She entered our room, closing the door behind her.

When the nurse and the attendants came out again in a couple of minutes the nurse said, "I'm sorry you were disturbed like this, Mr. Armstrong. Mr. Ranson is asleep now, and probably won't waken again until morning. If you like though you can take one of the empty beds in the dormitory for tonight. There are a couple of empty beds, aren't there, George?"

The elderly attendant nodded, as he picked up his spilled jug from the floor. "It may be best, Mr. Armstrong," he said, straightening up. "Sometimes a patient as disturbed as Mr. Ranson is pretty unpredictable. 'I'll sleep in my room,' I said. 'I'm sure Mr. Ranson will be all right by morning.'"

"I think so," said the nurse. "I gave him a rather heavy sedation."

Despite my brave words in the corridor however it took me a long time to fall asleep. The nurses and attendants could take such frenzied flareups in their stride but I couldn't.

It was some time during the night when I awoke thinking that the noise I'd heard in my sleep was Rock having another attack. I looked over to his bed and found it was empty. The shouting was coming from along the hall. I pulled on my bathrobe and slippers and hurried from the room.

The watchman who sat all night at the angle of the two corridors was staring into one of the toilets, wringing his hands.

"Get—me—a knife—the breadknife!" a night attendant was gasping. As the watchman ran into the small kitchen where the juice was kept and they made up the evening lunches, I looked around the toilet's open door. Rock was hanging strangled in his belt from an overhead pipe, the belt having been twisted around his neck. The attendant was trying to push him up by the legs to relieve the pressure on his throat. Rock's face was purple, his mouth twisted into an obscene leer. I tried to help the attendant hold him up—After they cut him down they tried mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on the corridor floor, but it was too late. By the time the doctors arrived, Rock was dead.

I was discharged from Pinehills shortly after lunch, and my son drove me back to the city. From our apartment window we can look

down on the back shed of an old private house in the next street. During the summer the shed is half hidden behind a row of tall flowering hollyhocks. Now the flowers were dead, their gangling stems dried and broken.

"What's the matter, Wilf?" my wife asked, as I swung away from the window.

"Nothing. Nothing's the matter at all. I just wish that old woman across the parking lot would get rid of her back shed. It's a real eyesore."

"It's pretty during the summer though when the flowers are out," she said. "What's the name of them again?"

"I forget," I answered.

Hugh Garner has long been one of Canada's most industrious story writers and novelists. Many of his stories have been universally recognized. 'One-Two-Three Little Indians' has, according to Mr. Garner's most recent count, been anthologized no less than 28 times since its first appearance in 1952. 'The Sound of Hollyhocks' is from Garner's latest collection of stories, VIOLATION OF THE VIRGINS (1971). HUGH GARNER'S BEST STORIES (1963) gives us a good sampling of his story-telling talents. A Toronto native, Garner presents a frankly realistic view of contemporary life, particularly the urban scene.